

The Missionary Origins of Modern Ecumenism

Milestones leading up to 1920

Fr. Peter Alban Heers

An address prepared for the Academic Conference
The Mission of the Orthodox Church
and The World Council of Churches
Athens, May 15, 2005

Introduction

The Historical Record and the Ecclesiological Framework of Ecumenism

Among many Orthodox Christians today it is generally accepted that the contemporary Ecumenical Movement began with the Patriarchal Encyclical of 1920 “Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere.” Furthermore, it is generally believed that the movement for Christian unity arose out of a search for “unity in truth” and doctrinal agreement. It will, thus, come as a surprise to many to discover that the historical record disproves both of these assertions beyond a shadow of a doubt.

History shows that the contemporary Ecumenical Movement has its roots in the Protestant missionary movement of the 19th century and its inspiration in the desire of Evangelical Protestants to achieve a “unity in fellowship” amongst themselves for greater success in the mission field. Willem Saayman, a Protestant scholar of missiology, begins his study on mission and unity with the following words: “The ecumenical movement does not derive simply from a passion for unity; it sprang *from a passion for unity that is completely fused in mission.*”¹ The union of mission and ecumenism, however, was not something arrived at quickly or painlessly for the Protestant world. It grew slowly in the soil of global confessional alliances and comity² agreements among the Protestants in the second half of the 19th century, and continued in the international student movements and missionary conferences, becoming a new paradigm of ecclesiastical unity – *for the*

¹ Saayman, Willem A., 1984. *Unity and Mission*, Pretoria: University of South Africa (emphasis mine). That the contemporary ecumenical movement has its immediate origins in the 19th century Protestant missionary movement is generally accepted. “The contemporary search for the unity of the church was initiated within the framework of the mission endeavour. The missionaries were among the first to look for ways and styles of witness in unity, recognizing that the scandal of Christian divisions and denominational rivalries hindered greatly the impact of their message.” *Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today*, Preparatory Paper No 1 for the WCME conference in Athens, May 2005. See also chapters 7 and 8 in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1968*, Edited by Routh Rouse and Stephen C. Neil, WCC, Geneva, fourth edition, 1993. Fr. George Tsetsis appears to hold a different opinion in his article *The Orthodox in the Ecumenical Movement*, where he states: “Ecumenism both as a theological challenge and as an expression of Orthodox willingness for Christian unity was experienced in our Church during the 1st, 5th, 11th and 16th centuries. *It re-emerged* at the beginning of the twentieth century *when the Ecumenical Patriarchate took its afore-mentioned initiative* [the 1920 encyclical – ed.], in order to foster cooperation and promote unity” (emphasis mine).

² In this context, comity refers to the avoidance of proselytizing members of another religious denomination.

conversion of the world. It became, from 1910 onwards, the basis upon which the Ecumenical Movement was built.³

It is, thus, apparent that, long before the 1920 encyclical was sent out and the Orthodox entered into the discussion, the presuppositions and parameters of encounter were set and they did not, even in the slightest, reflect or even acknowledge Orthodox ecclesiological principles.⁴ The ecclesiological framework in which the ecumenical movement was forged, formed, developed and exists to this day is, with slight adjustments, the product of 19th century Evangelicalism.

In this paper we will examine this “evangelical ecclesiology,” the “pre-history” of ecumenism, its origins in Protestant mission, and the historical and theological context into which the Orthodox entered the ecumenical movement. In particular, we will stop at five major milestones through which ecumenism passed on its way to Orthodox involvement:

Milestone One

The Protestant Missionary Movement of the 19th Century

We begin our journey with the Great Evangelical Awakenings. In order to correctly assess the modern Ecumenical Movement as a whole, and the World Missionary Conferences in particular, it is essential to understand the foundational role played by the “great revivals” of the 19th century which swept across Europe and North America. According to the historian James Hastings Nichols, by the end of the eighteenth century the Reformed confessions had sunk to their lowest ebb in terms of “religious vitality” and were badly in need of a spiritual recovery.⁵ This recovery came with the Evangelical Awakening, the origins of which can be traced to the Pietist movement in Germany, the rise of Methodism in Great Britain, and the Great Awakening on the American frontier⁶. It was a movement which, although finding its chief stimulus in British Evangelicalism, can be characterized as transnational, passing from country to country.⁷ Whatever its origins, however, its spirit and its underlying motives were always the same: a passion for evangelism. Out of this passion came into being societies, voluntary movements, and organizations in which Protestants of different nations and denominations “banded themselves together to win the world for Christ.”⁸

³ See: Goheen, Michael W., *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you: J.E. Lesslie Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2000), chapter 2: *From Christendom to a Missionary Ecclesiology*, <http://www.library.uu.nl/digiarchief/dip/diss/1947080/inhoud.htm>.

⁴ But, then again, as we will show further on, neither did those Orthodox who first took part in the movement call for or even advance such principles as a pre-requisite for participation.

⁵ Nichols, James Hastings (Professor of Church History, University of the Chicago), *History of Christianity, 1650-1950, The Secularization of the West* (The Ronald Press Company, 1956), p. 135.

⁶ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1968*, Chapter 7: *Voluntary Movements and the Changing Ecumenical Climate*, Edited by Routh Rouse and Stephen Neil (Geneva: WCC, fourth edition, 1993), p. 309.

⁷ Nichols, p. 135.

⁸ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 309.

Thus, it was that “the missionary movement came out of the evangelical awakening.”⁹ The missionary movement, however, did not of course exist in a vacuum, but was heavily conditioned by historic circumstances. The dream of converting the heathen across the globe was stimulated by, and came on the heels of, colonial expansion and conquest and thus was largely dependent upon the Western powers, especially Great Britain and America, for its practical implementation. In the marriage of mission and colonialism, therefore, in addition to the passion for “Christianizing” the world there was added the task of “civilizing” it.

Samuel Worcester of the American wing of Foreign Missions described his society’s objective as “civilizing and christianizing” – in that order: “To make the whole tribe English in their language, civilized in their habits, and Christian in their religion: this is the present plan.”¹⁰

If, however, “christianizing” was inseparable from “civilizing” for the American Protestant missionary, Christianity without commerce was unlikely for the British Protestant. In 1856 the explorer-missionary David Livingstone electrified the British nation with tales of his adventurous travels across Africa, thereby launching that alliance for “commerce, civilization, and Christianity” which was to characterize British Protestant missions in the colonial era. By cultivating the native inclination for trade, he claimed that

“the advantages that might be derived in a commercial point of view are incalculable; nor should we lose sight of the inestimable blessings it is in our power to bestow upon the unenlightened African, by giving him the light of Christianity. Those two pioneers of civilization – Christianity and commerce – should ever be inseparable.”¹¹

Commercial opportunities alone, however, certainly would not have been sufficient to galvanize what Protestant historians like to call the “greatest geographic expansion of the Faith that had yet been seen.”¹² The rapid development of the missionary spirit and missionary organizations among evangelicals was mainly responsible for, what Rufus Anderson described as, “the avowed expectation and purpose – for the first time since the apostolic age – of laboring for the conversion of the whole heathen world.”¹³

Behind the explosion in missions lies the desire of Protestants to break out of their conventional, regimented way of life and discover “what is beyond the frontiers of

⁹ Philip, T. V. *Edinburgh to Salvador: Twentieth Century Ecumenical Missiology : A Historical Study of the Ecumenical Discussions on Mission* (Delhi, Tiruvalla India: ISPCK Christian Sahitya Samithy, 1999), p. 7. <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1573&C=1517>

¹⁰ Thomas, Norman E (Editor), *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 61, which is quoting from: Samuel Worscester, “1816 Report,” in *the First Ten Annual Reports of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions with Other Documents of the Board* (Boston: ABCFM, 1834), p. 135-6.

¹¹ Thomas, Norman E (Editor), *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*, p. 67, which is quoting from: David Livingstone, *D. Livingstone’s Cambridge Lectures*, ed. William Monk (London: Deighton, Bell & Co., 1860), p. 165.

¹² *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1968*, Chapter 8: *Ecumenical Bearings of the Missionary Movement and the International Missionary Council*, Edited by Routh Rouse and Stephen Neil (WCC, Geneva, fourth edition, 1993), p. 353.

¹³ Thomas, Norman E (Editor), *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 68, which is quoting from: Rufus Anderson, *Foreign Missions* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1870), p. 1; cf. pp. 109-110, 115, 117-119.

normal experience.”¹⁴ The optimism, idealism and dreaminess¹⁵ which characterized mid-century mission was not, however, limited to a few visionaries or totally unfounded, but was rather based upon impressive signs of growth in activity and resources. Thus it was that by the turn of the century, John Mott, the “spokesman for global missions among the Protestants,”¹⁶ dared to speak of “the evangelization of the world in this generation.”¹⁷ On the one hand, Mott pointed to the growth of the missionary societies. At the beginning of the nineteenth century there were six Protestant missionary organizations. By the end of the century there were 537. On the other hand, he saw an “unparalleled opportunity” in the control which Western rulers had over the inhabitants of one-third of the “unevangelized world”:¹⁸

“...it seems entirely possible,” he wrote, “to fill the earth with the knowledge of Christ before the present generation passes away. . . . Now steam and electricity have brought the world together. The Church of God is in the ascendant. She has well within her control the power, the wealth, and the learning of the world.”¹⁹

This global vision of mission was, in two important ways, to set the stage for the “ecumenical century” to follow. Firstly, it took Protestantism out of its isolation in the West and brought it face to face both with cultures, peoples and faiths around the world and with its own divisions reflected in the denominational chaos which was transplanted to the mission field. In this respect, it is quite telling that the most outspoken proponents of ecumenism after the turn of the century were the leaders of the newly-planted missions of China and India. The children of division were calling their fathers to give account.

Secondly, the missionary movement often went hand in hand with colonial and economic expansion. In this way, the worldwide spread of Protestantism is seen to be an important factor in the first stages of the process of globalization,²⁰ which has been built upon the common language and culture of the Protestant West.²¹

Thus, the Protestant missionary enterprise served as the spring board of the ecumenical movement and prepared the ground for the arrival of the “ecumenical century” and the move from a missionary to an “ecumenical ecclesiology.”

Milestone Two

¹⁴ Newbigin, Lesslie, *Mission to Six Continents*, in *History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 174.

¹⁵ J.H. Nichols writes characteristically: “[William] Carey, perhaps the chief pioneer of Evangelical missions, derived part of his inspiration from reading of the work done among the Indians in Colonial America by John Eliot and David Brainerd. This reading, and his reading of the Voyages of Captain Cook combined to inspire his dream of a mission to all humanity.” Nichols, p. 308.

¹⁶ Thomas, Norman E (Editor), *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*, p. 74.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 74, which is quoting from John R. Mott, *The Evangelization of the World in This Generation* (New York, Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1900).

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 75.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 76.

²⁰ Globalization, which “levels everything and disintegrates social life.” Mantzarides, George, *Christian Ethics II* (Thessaloniki: Pounara, 2003), p. 124 (In Greek). It is indeed tragically ironic yet quite telling that in unifying the non-Christian world within itself Protestantism leads them into division.

²¹ J.H. Nichols notes characteristically: “A considerable section of the Protestant workers in China were consciously out to remake all Chinese life, and they were having appreciable influence in that direction.” Nichols, p. 432.

The Evangelical Ecclesiology: The Invisible Church

In the heady atmosphere of missionary expectation and aspiration, then, the ground was readied for the seed of ecumenism to be planted. The spirit of unity was rising upon the divided Protestant world like a phoenix out of the ashes. One historian describes the evangelical movement's unifying effects thus:

"In its first exhilarating phase, the suddenness of the awakening, the sense of millennial expectation it aroused, the freshness of the evangelical experience, the revival movement, all served to create a powerful sense of fraternity among those who were awakened. Armenians and Calvinists, Churchmen and Dissenters, achieved an unprecedented level of unity."²²

This sense of fraternity was not limited to feelings alone, but gave itself expression institutionally, as well. London, in 1846, was the setting for the coming into being of a "new thing" in Church history – "a definite organization for the expression of unity amongst Christian individuals belonging to different Churches, namely, the Evangelical Alliance."²³ Eight hundred Evangelical leaders belonging to no less than fifty-two Protestant denominations were in attendance. Hailed "as if it were the millennium," it is claimed that here "the reality of Christian unity had at last found corporate expression."²⁴

The Evangelical Alliance was an organization which "aimed at making the "Invisible Church visible," "that the world may know."²⁵ In large part through the Alliance Evangelicals "had learnt to feel themselves one in Christ, across national and ecclesiastical boundaries, had banded themselves together in voluntary societies, and had come to look upon co-operation with each other in the service of their Lord as a normal and joyful part of the Christian life."²⁶

United in the evangelical experience through the missionary societies, in spite of or in indifference to dogmatic differences, the unity of the evangelicals can rightly said to be one of the first expressions of the contemporary ecumenical spirit.²⁷ They realized that, as T.V. Philip has written,

"they shared an experience that marked them off decisively from all others and gathered them together in the fellowship of an invisible church of Christ to which all 'vital' Christians belonged. The evangelical experience was not a matter of theological reflection, but rather a general experiential crisis...For them, *if the theologies could divide, experience could unite.*"²⁸

²² Philip, T. V., p. 7.

²³ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 324..

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 319-320. To name a few of the many "far-reaching results" credited to the Evangelical Alliance: the "week of Christian prayer," the plan for the first International Missionary Conference, and surveys of the missionary work throughout the world, which would anticipate those that later appeared in *The International Review of Missions*.

²⁵ These very expressions were later to become the slogans of the World Council of Churches.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 234.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Philip, T. V., p. 8 (emphasis mine).

The passion for evangelism gave rise to the passion for unity, expressed both on the practical level, toward greater missionary success, and on the theoretical level, in the evangelical conception of the church as being invisible and of unity as being a matter of the heart; spiritual not organic.²⁹ The spread and acceptance of this conception of the church throughout and eventually beyond evangelical circles was made possible by the missionary society – an organization at once non-ecclesial and super-ecclesial.

Protestant historian Ruth Rouse has this to say about the evangelical missionary societies:

“They were not ecumenical in objective...but...they were *ecumenical in result*. . . they created a consciousness of unity, a “sense of togetherness” amongst Christians of different Churches. Though rarely formulated, *the fundamental conception of Christian unity which lay beneath their common striving was that all true Christians share the life in Christ, that they are one by virtue of that sharing, and that this oneness is the essential Christian unity.*”³⁰

A “new thing” had appeared in Christian history: an invisible “church” simultaneously within and above the churches. Evangelicals lived a double existence: they were respectable and loyal members of the national church but they also knew in their hearts that they shared a common faith and experience with other Evangelicals “that transcended denominational boundaries and theological parties.”³¹ For the Evangelicals, whose principle task was to preach the Gospel to the heathen, the greatest evil of the time was “denominational bigotry.” Hence, when in 1795 the London Missionary Society was founded, which was started as a union effort of Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Anglicans, it was hailed as “the funeral of bigotry.”³²

Out of the common evangelical experience, then, an “evangelical ecclesiology” had appeared founded upon the watchword: “if theologies can divide, experience can unite.”

By way of the evangelical societies and experience, denominational walls were circumvented and Christian unity came to be based on subjective experience, divorced from theological truth. This meant that divisions of a doctrinal or ecclesiological nature were to be overlooked for the sake of an unclear ideal of “Christianity”. In this way the unity of theology and experience, life and truth, were rent asunder, and the door was flung open to the creation of a church within and transcending the churches – a kind of super, but invisible, church, made up of all ‘vital’ Christians, possessing special traits, experiences and knowledge.

When, however, life and faith, experience and theology are separated, theology is not long thereafter discarded and disdained, first as something dead and unessential, then as something annoying and obstructive. Hence, in the Protestant world, insisting on certain aspects of ecclesiology and church life and order become akin to “bigotry”. The Orthodox Christian does not, however, insist on particular points of doctrine out of some small-minded, passionate bigotry, but precisely because they know where indifference or

²⁹ Ibid., p. 2, 4.

³⁰ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 309.

³¹ Philip, T. V., p. 8.

³² Ibid.

disdain for the truth of Christ and His Church lead – to the kind of dissolution and division which characterize the Protestant world and has led them to the dead-end of secularization.

Milestone Three

The Y.M.C.A and Student Christian Movements: The Inspiration of the Ecumenical Generation

Toward the end of the century³³ there arose two movements which “were destined perhaps more than any other results of the Evangelical Awakening to prepare for and affect the course of the modern ecumenical movement.” These movements were the Young Men’s Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.)³⁴ and the Student Christian Movement (SCM). The central role these organizations played in the development of ecumenism is obvious when one considers that four-fifths of those assembled on the platform at World Council of Churches founding assembly owed their “ecumenical inspiration” to these student groups.³⁵

While most leaders of the student movements were indifferent to ecclesiastical questions and to the relations of the churches, they were nevertheless evangelical, missionary and consciously *international*. They developed their movements into world organizations. They turned toward the East and Africa and intentionally sought out and trained Oriental leaders. They realized the strategic importance of the student movement and enabled it to serve the ecumenical future.

By 1895 the Student Christian Movements of many lands had already coalesced in the World’s Student Christian Federation. John Mott, the “symbol and prophet” of the transition from evangelicalism to ecumenism and the man responsible for the Federation, wrote the following, days after its founding:

“The Federation will . . . unite in spirit the students of the world [and] in doing this it will be achieving a yet more significant result – the hastening of the answer to our Lord’s prayer, ‘that they all may be one’. . . Surely there has been no more hopeful development towards a real spiritual union of Christendom than the . . . Federation, which unites in common purpose and work the coming leaders of the Church and State in all lands.”³⁶

³³ Actually, the Y.M.C.A. was founded in the 1840’s and the SCM in 1895. The missionary wing of the Student Christian Movement was the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions.

³⁴ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 327. Indeed, the Y.M.C.A. was ecumenical from its very founding. When young George Williams was discussing the founding of the organization with three other young men, he exclaimed: “Here we are, an Episcopalian, a Methodist, a Baptist, and a Congregationalist – four believers but a single faith in Christ. Forward together!” Ibid.

³⁵ Leaders who began their ecumenical career as members or officers in some S.C.M. or were “won for ecumenism” by some contact with the movement include: John R. Mott, Robert Wilder, Nathan Söderblom, W.A. Visser’t Hooft, J.H. Oldham, Tissington Tatlow, Zoë Fairfield, William Temple, William Paton, Marc Boegner, Suzanne de Diétrich, Friedrich Wilhelm Siegmund-Schultze, Hanns Lilje, V.S. Azariah, David Yui, T.Z. Koo, Michi Kawai, Germanos Strenopoulos of Thyateira (Metropolitan Exarch), Stefan Zankov.

³⁶ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 341.

It was John Mott, who would also go on to play the central and pivotal role in bringing the Orthodox Church into the ecumenical movement.³⁷ Due to Mott's persistence and astuteness, sixteen years later, in 1911, the Constantinople Conference of the Federation was held, with its "epoch-making representation of the Eastern Churches."³⁸ Mott had been working hard to bring the Orthodox into the Student Movement, traveling throughout the Balkans and Russia³⁹, such that by 1911 he became convinced that cooperation with the Orthodox was possible. He quoted the words of an early acquaintance and supporter of the SCM, Germanos Strenopoulos, Metropolitan of Thyateira and Exarch of Western Europe for the Ecumenical Patriarchate, in support of his optimism: "Where hearts are united, the resistance of the head will diminish. It was the looseness of the bonds of love, which brought the divisions of Christianity."⁴⁰

Ruth Rouse, Mott's co-worker and ecumenical historian, asks: "What was the new ecumenical idea which the Student Christian Movement was destined to introduce to the Church?" It was the "idea of a new type of Christian organization, a new conception of the basis on which Christians belonging to different Churches might unite to win the world for Christ – on an 'interdenominational' rather than an 'undenominational' basis."⁴¹ It was a movement which "started with the belief that they shared the life in Christ with fellow-believers" and recognized the believers' "allegiance to the various Christian Bodies into which" – as they thought – "the Body of Christ is divided."⁴²

The Student Christian Movements became the link that would carry the Evangelical ecclesiology beyond the narrow confines of Evangelicalism. Non-doctrinal, non-ecclesial, non-sacramental, the student movements, ironically, at once signaled the disintegration of the Western confessions and their reintegration, but in a non-ecclesial way. They sought catholicity, but only horizontally, not vertically, not diachronically.

It was through such experiences, then, that by the eve of the Edinburgh conference in 1910 such early Orthodox ecumenical enthusiasts as Metropolitan Germanos Strenopoulos were prepared to take their place at the table of the modern ecumenical movement.⁴³

Strenopoulos' stance, however, was not the only one possible. There were other Orthodox who rejected Mott's call to unity and communion precisely on the grounds that those issuing it were ignoring the *ever-present* unity and communion of the Church. One such renowned Orthodox theologian and hierarch was the New Hieromartyr Hilarion (Troitsky). After one of John Mott's visits to Russia, he wrote the following:

³⁷ Ruth Rouse puts it this way: "He steadily cultivated relationships not only with all Protestant Churches but also with the ancient Churches of the East, and *did much to draw them into the ecumenical movement*. A remarkable incident in this phase of his activities was when in 1913 he, an American Methodist layman, chaired the first conference on reunion amongst the different branches of the Syrian Church in India." *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 344.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 342.

³⁹ A Russian Student Christian Movement was established in 1903 under the leadership of the Lutheran Baron Nicolay, including in its ranks both Orthodox and non-Orthodox. See the comments of New Martyr Hilarion (Troitsky) below.

⁴⁰ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 651.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 342.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 343, 342.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 344.

"People who deny the Church constantly speak about "evangelical principles," about evangelical teaching; but Christianity as life is completely alien to them . . . Protestantism has killed the general Church life, about which the Lord Jesus Christ prayed in that first sacred prayer."

The Holy Hieromartyr then addressed the Student Movement in particular:

"While I was listening to the lecture on "The International Christian Student Union," my heart was filled with sadness and sorrow. How many sincere people who are thirsty for God, thirsty for life, are perishing of hunger and being fed the suckle of some overseas student union. Can it be that they do not know how to make use of the abundant bread in the home of the heavenly Father, in the Orthodox Church? It is necessary only to forget all the "federative bases," to freely give oneself up to complete obedience to the Orthodox Church and to adhere to the completeness of Church life, to the life of the body of Christ (in order to make use of these abundant breads)."⁴⁴

The judgment of Saint Hilarion was not shared by those Orthodox who rushed to unite with the heterodox in fellowship without first uniting in the Truth and the Church. But there is one more step that the Protestant world must take before the Orthodox will join them in their search for unity: Edinburgh 1910.

Milestone Four

Edinburgh 1910: The Cradle of Modern Ecumenism

The International Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 has been hailed by historians as a "watershed event in ecumenical cooperation,"⁴⁵ "one of the great landmarks in the history of the Church"⁴⁶ and "the cradle of modern ecumenism."⁴⁷

Edinburgh was the first conference which sought to be inclusive of a wide range of Protestant confessions, not just Evangelicals. "Out of it grew the movements which were to merge to form the World Council of Churches in 1948, and the International Missionary Council, which became the mission and evangelism arm of the WCC in 1961. Convinced that God was calling them to world evangelization, the Edinburgh delegates saw church divisions as a mission weakness and unity in mission as a divine imperative."⁴⁸

When the call was finally sent out to come to Edinburgh, "to spend and be spent" in the ecumenical movement, Evangelical leadership had "been accustomed all along to enter into common conference and co-operation with [their] separated brethren."⁴⁹ John Mott, who was a Methodist, a layman and "a spiritual child of the revival movement," was "the mastermind of the gathering."⁵⁰ Together with Joseph H. Oldham, also a child of the student and missionary movements, Mott fashioned the Edinburgh assembly into a

⁴⁴ Troitsky, New Hieromartyr Hilarion, *Christianity or the Church* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery).

⁴⁵ Thomas, Norman E (Editor), *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*, p. 224.

⁴⁶ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 355.

⁴⁷ Thomas, Norman E (Editor), *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*, p. 223.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 324.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 356.

training ground for ecumenical leadership, such that few if any of the attendees “escaped the contagion of its spirit.”⁵¹

Although ecclesiastical or doctrinal questions were formally off-limits and concern was directed to strategy and co-operation in mission, the need for unity in the mission field permeated the entire conference. The missionaries were “literally plaintive in their appeal that the church of Christ re-establish her long lost unity.”⁵² Fear of the rise and independence of the mission churches and their breaking away from the western traditions and western control led the missionary societies into co-operation and unity.⁵³ Lord Balfour, former secretary for Scotland in the British Cabinet, acknowledged the influence of the young churches’ pleas when he asserted that “a unity begun on the mission field may extend its influence and react upon us at home and throughout the older civilizations.”⁵⁴ And Episcopalian Bishop Brent, who would soon emerge as the leader of the Faith and Order movement, expressed the urgency of the crisis: “we missionaries have moments of deep depression when the consciousness sweeps over us that it is little short of absurd to try to bring into the Church of Christ the great nations of the Far East unless we can present an undivided front.”⁵⁵

Bishop Brent’s despair was not unfounded. Within 19th century Protestantism the separation between church and mission was so great that “the only reality for Christians in the mission field, was mission,” such that they were not even conscious of belonging to a church.⁵⁶ In Edinburgh, however, the church, at least theoretically, made its appearance: “the world mission of Christianity had become church-centric” and the foreign mission as an administrative entity was about to drop into irrelevance.⁵⁷ The move from para-church to inter-church had begun and in this the modern ecumenical movement was born.

The push for mission had revealed division, and division was a scandal which the mission churches, under the pressure of nationalism, reacted against. Their reaction was the spark which ignited ecumenism in the home churches – an ecumenism characterized by dogmatic minimalism and “unity in fellowship.” This chain of reactions led to the Edinburgh assembly, which, under the leadership of John Mott, marks the culmination of the purely Evangelical offering and the real institutional beginning of the transition from an evangelical to an “ecumenical ecclesiology” for Christianity.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 360. An eye-witness in Edinburgh and reporter for The Christian Century communicates something of this “contagion of the spirit” felt by the attendees thus: “As one read the reports one seemed to be looking into the great workshop of history. One saw the forces that were making nations, that were making religions, and those who had eyes to see saw the forming of something very vast, very formidable, and full of promise.” Morrison, Charles Clayton, *The World Missionary Conference*, The Christian Century, July 7, 1910.

⁵² Morrison, Charles Clayton, *The World Missionary Conference*, The Christian Century, July 7, 1910, (Article prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock, Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation).

⁵³ Philip, T. V., p. 13.

⁵⁴ Morrison, C.C. *The World Missionary Conference*.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Philip, T. V., p. 15.

⁵⁷ Philip, T. V., p. 24. These were the observations of Henry T. Silcock in summing up the conference discussions.

A “united and renewed church” outfitted for a universal mission and service, moving beyond its borders, uniting the entire “oikumene”: this is the new dream that stirred men into performing the incredible drama of Edinburgh and the modern ecumenical movement. It is a dream with “eschatological implications,” and they are quite correct who see in it a strange inversion of the Christian Church which had hitherto existed.

At Edinburgh the walls of doctrine began to fall and in their place were erected the belief that differences would be transcended without being surrendered.⁵⁸ After Edinburgh, however, the Orthodox would soon enter the scene and be forced to work within such a framework and mindset that did not allow for Orthodox ecclesiological presuppositions.

Milestone Five

Widening the Notion of the Church: The 1920 Encyclical and Early Orthodox Participation

As we have seen, within the first decade of the 20th century John Mott and his co-workers had canvassed hard for Orthodox involvement in the Protestant movement for “unity in fellowship.” The fruit of their work was shown first of all in the “epoch-making” Constantinople assembly of the W.C.S.F. in 1911, where Metropolitan Germanos encountered the fresh enthusiasm of the Edinburgh conference in such men as John Mott, Swedish Archbishop Nathan Söderblom and other pioneers of the ecumenical movement.⁵⁹ The Edinburgh nucleus would thereafter span out to create a variety of venues which were designed, in part, to open up the movement to the East and South: J.H. Oldham continued the work of the World Missionary Conference; Bishop Brent spearheaded the Faith and Order movement; Nathan Söderblom championed the Life and Work movement, and so on. It was in the midst of these developments and under the shadow of their influence that Germanos Strenopoulos and others composed the historic text that would become the 1920 Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, “Unto the Churches of Christ everywhere.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 360. “At Edinburgh Christians of very different allegiances found that uninhibited discussions could be carried on in an atmosphere of common worship, that in a fellowship knit together and deepened by prayer conscientiously-held differences could be clearly stated and transcended without surrender, and that the unity of Christ’s Church in the midst of differences could be clearly felt.”

⁵⁹ Visser’t Hooft, W.A., *The Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches* (WCC: Geneva 1982), p. 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2. W.A. Visser’t Hooft writes that Germanos Strenopoulos “is generally supposed to have written most of the text.” Likewise that, “In April 1919, when a delegation of the American Episcopal Church visited Constantinople to inform the Patriarchate of the plan to hold a World Conference on Faith and Order, the Metropolitan of Caesarea was able to report on behalf of the synod that the special committee set up to study ‘the question of the league of the different churches and of their possible rapprochement’ had already reached its conclusions.” Visser’t Hooft sees this as proof of the independent inspiration of the Patriarchate, unrelated to the influence of the Protestants, and hence confirmation of its divine inspiration. A more sober assessment, however, and one that Visser’t Hooft himself (curiously) makes reference to elsewhere, leads one to see the 1920 encyclical as the fruit of the political instability of the day, and of the Patriarchate’s desire to emerge from isolation and put an end to the “sheep-stealing” of the Protestant missionaries. Furthermore, this

Passing over a number of aspects of the Encyclical which have been widely disputed elsewhere, we will focus on only one historical and theological detail of great importance. In the Encyclical a new consideration was being urged upon the churches, “that they should no more consider one another as strangers and foreigners, but as relatives, and as being a part of the household of Christ and ‘fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise of God in Christ’ (Eph. 3:6).”⁶¹

In commenting on this passage in 1929, Metropolitan Germanos himself, the encyclical’s main author, interprets it thus:

“How wide the conception is which the Encyclical teaches at this point becomes clear in *that it widens the notion of the relationships between the members of a single church* – as members of one body according to St. Paul’s wonderful teaching – *so as to apply it to the relationships between several churches.*”⁶²

The importance of this interpretation of the encyclical by its main author and the architect of the Patriarchate’s ecumenical involvement cannot be underestimated. Here is the cornerstone of the ecumenical policy of the Patriarchate and the key point of synchronization with the developing “ecumenical ecclesiology” of the Protestants.

In widening the notion of the church to include bodies neither ecclesiastically, sacramentally, or dogmatically in communion with the Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Germanos is in perfect harmony both with the foregoing “evangelical ecclesiology” which speaks of a “fellowship of an *invisible* church of Christ to which all ‘vital’ Christians belonged,” as well as the succeeding “ecumenical ecclesiology” which, although quite similar in its admission of an existing invisible “mystical” Body of Christ, seeks a *manifest* unity in Christ.⁶³

Metropolitan Germanos’ radical reinterpretation and “broadening” of St. Paul’s teaching concerning the Body of Christ was not something limited to him, but, as would be natural in the overwhelmingly Protestant setting of the movement’s gatherings, such ecclesiological “broad mindedness” permeated the entire atmosphere of ecumenical engagement.⁶⁴ This led to the adoption by Orthodox ecumenists – consciously or unconsciously – of Protestant ecclesiological attitudes.

evaluation of events is supported by the subsequent development of the Patriarchate’s ecumenical approach amid increased political turmoil and instability.

⁶¹ “Unto the Churches of Christ everywhere,” Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, 1920, p. 2.

⁶² Visser’t Hooft, p. 3 (emphasis mine). He is quoting from *Die Eiche*, 1929, p. 30.

⁶³ Indeed, Germanos’ intervention could be seen as a bridge uniting the individualistic ecclesiology of the evangelicals, which focused on a fellowship of individuals in an invisible church, and the corporate ecclesiology of ecumenism, which focuses on a “fellowship of churches” and the “*manifestation* of the Church in its oneness.” This last phrase is from *The Statement on “The Church, the churches and the World Council of Churches: The ecclesiological significance of the World Council of Churches,”* IV:2 (emphasis mine). This statement, drafted in part and agreed to by Orthodox representatives, was received by the Central Committee of the WCC in Toronto in 1950, only two years after the founding of the WCC. The Orthodox have participated under the terms of this statement ever-since.

⁶⁴ This is one of the most characteristic marks of ecumenical involvement for the Orthodox: that in spite, at times, of quite orthodox statements concerning the Church by individual participants, the very basis for involvement – inclusiveness of that which is incongruous - undermines and ultimately (if the goal is the *building up* of the Church through sacramental initiation) renders non-existent Orthodox witness. Only by severely downgrading or eliminating altogether the importance of initiation into the life of the Church can one speak of Orthodox witness to the heterodox in the framework of ecumenical encounter. Ultimately, this

Indeed, already in 1920, at the very first gathering at which Orthodox representatives were present, it was the Orthodox who would first propose the notion of cooperation in mission. In the name of the Orthodox Church, Professor Alivisatos of Athens presented a program for a creation of a League of Churches which included, as its first point, "To stop proselytizing between the Christian churches, and to promote mutual understanding between them for Christian missions among non-Christian peoples."⁶⁵

From the outset of ecumenical involvement, then, the Orthodox followed their Protestant forerunners closely in connecting ecumenism to mission and adopting that cornerstone principle of Protestant ecumenism – comity (non-proselytism) agreements and mutual support in mission. That which today still seems unbelievable to most Orthodox Christians – collaboration in mission with the heterodox – was never a problem for Orthodox ecumenists. Indeed, it was one of the Patriarchate's motivating factors for involvement in the first place.

Seven years later, in 1927 at the Faith and Order conference in Lausanne, the declaration of the Orthodox included sentiments quite similar to those we've seen expressed by Protestants. The delegates declared "that, although divided by dogmatic differences, we are *one* with our brethren here *in faith* in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."⁶⁶ Similarly, ten years later in Edinburgh, Metropolitan Germanos again read a statement by the Orthodox which, after noting certain Orthodox views, nevertheless included a decidedly Protestant ecclesiological outlook: "Brethren!...With you we bewail *the rending asunder of the seamless robe of Christ*. We desire, as you, that *the members of the one Body of Christ may again be reunited*..."⁶⁷

In addition to this separate statement at the Edinburgh conference, the Orthodox also joined in adopting the "Question of Affirmation of union in allegiance to our Lord Jesus Christ in view of the world-situation." It reads, in part: severe

"We are *one in faith* in our Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God...This unity does not consist in the agreement of our minds or the consent of our wills. It is founded in Jesus Christ Himself, Who lived, died and rose again to bring us to the Father, and Who through the Holy Spirit dwells in His Church. . . *Our unity is of heart and spirit*. We are *divided in the outward forms* of our life in Christ, because we understand differently His will for His Church. . .We know that our witness is weakened by our divisions. Yet *we are one in Christ and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit*."⁶⁸

In making such statements, the Orthodox representatives were in effect acknowledging the *de facto* inclusive "ecumenical ecclesiology" inherent to the movement. Indeed, from the outset of Orthodox participation in 1920, Metropolitan Germanos' "widened notion of the church" placed the Orthodox in perfect harmony with the tenor of the movement and thereby acknowledged it, in a way, as "an ontologically new

translates into denying the existential reality of the Church itself (the *life* in Christ), and hence, by extension, the very diachronic presence of the Incarnate Christ Himself.

⁶⁵ Visser't Hooft, p. 6. He is quoting from *Faith and Order pamphlet No. 34*, "A Compilation of Proposals for Christian Unity," pp. 78-79.

⁶⁶ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 656.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 659 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 434-5 (emphasis mine).

phenomenon in Christian history requiring a deep rethinking and re-evaluation of Orthodox ecclesiology as shaped in the 'non-ecumenical' era."⁶⁹

The 1920 Encyclical has been hailed as a prophetic and "ground-breaking" event which not only ushered the Orthodox into the Ecumenical Movement but was largely responsible for the movement itself. This contention, however, is not proven out by the preceding string of historical events. Rather, the encyclical appears to be a reaction and a departure: a reaction to political and world events⁷⁰ and a departure from the hitherto cautious approach based upon the experience of the Orthodox and the Church's ancient canons.⁷¹ Yet, it was more than just a departure; it represented a "remarkable change of mind."⁷² With the encyclical, the Patriarchate did not simply change its stance vis-à-vis the heterodox confessions, it changed its understanding of the Orthodox Church itself.

Conclusion

As it pertains to the theological approach to the issue, from that time until today not much has changed in the realm of official, conciliar Orthodox theology. There has been no indication of previous errors; no official corrective synodical judgment has been made – except for those decisions which are considered schismatic and marginal.

On the contrary, confusion and double-talk reign and the Orthodox ecumenists would like us to view the World Council of Churches (WCC) as a worldwide humanitarian and peace-making platform for dialogue, from which we must not be absent "lest we become

⁶⁹ This is how Fr. Alexander Schmemmann described the approach of certain Russian theologians to the phenomenon of the Ecumenical Movement and to the nature of Orthodox participation in it. Father Schmemmann included as representatives of the above mentioned view such Russian émigré theologians as Sergius Bulgakov, Leo Zander, Nicholas Zernov, and Pavel Evdokimov. See: *Russian Theology 1920-1972*, pp. 190-1919, as quoted by Andrew Blane in *George Florovsky, Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman* (Saint Vladimir Seminary Press, New York, 1993), p. 125. See also: *Divine Ascent, A Journal of Orthodox Faith*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1997 (Monastery of St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco, Point Reyes, CA.), p. 43f.

⁷⁰ The document itself explains that both the inspiration for its writing and the timing of its release are closely connected to the establishment of the League of Nations (which actually failed miserably) by political leaders who were "truly applying the spirit of the Gospel and the teaching of Christ." As W.A. Visser't Hooft observes: "Twice in the Encyclical itself and again in the covering letter, the League of Nations was mentioned...The covering letter spoke of 'the setting up a league of churches (*koinonia ton Ekklesion*) on the model of the League of Nations (*koinonia ton Ethnon*).'" Furthermore, "the Encyclical was written in the year 1919, the year in which the dream dreamt by so many philosophers, the dream of an international order based on law and justice, seemed at last to become a political reality." Visser't Hooft, p. 4. The picture presented is clearly one of the Church following the world, both in inspiration and in method, which, under another name, is called secularization (*ekkosmikevsi*).

⁷¹ In so much as "the synod felt that rapprochement and cooperation between the churches did not have to wait until doctrinal differences were overcome" (Visser't Hooft, p. 3), the Patriarchate was falling in step with the Protestant notion that "unity in fellowship" did not have to wait until "unity in truth" and that "differences would be transcended without being surrendered." Nicholas Zernov, an enthusiastic supporter of the encyclical's innovative approach, wrote that "this epistle signified a departure from the usual cautious attitude of the Orthodox towards the West." See: Zernov Nicholas, *The Eastern Churches and the Ecumenical Movement in the Twentieth Century*, in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 654. Likewise, W.A. Visser't Hooft writes that the Ecumenical Patriarchate's encyclical was "an initiative which was without precedent in church history." See: Visser't Hooft, W.A., p. 1.

⁷² *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 654.

isolated.” The truth is, however, that the WCC has never ceased to be driven by the Evangelical Protestant dream of a united and worldwide mission irrespective of dogmatic peculiarities and sensitivities – something which perhaps is understandable for the Protestants, with the minor dogmatic differences which usually exist between them, but not for the Orthodox. For the Orthodox the very basis for involvement – recognizing a unity in Christ and the Church with the heterodox – nullifies the very reason for involvement, namely, to instill in the heterodox “a good uneasiness” and sense of separation from the Church.⁷³ That which makes their dream even more dangerous, however, is that today the World Council of Churches advertises its failing as an advantage and begins to honor and “celebrate” the “distinctiveness” and “differences” of its members instead of being aggrieved over them and attempt to overcome them.

If we add to all of this the pre-existing estrangement of many members of the WCC from the authentic faith and ethos of the Gospel, as well as its increasingly visible approach to and reconciliation with the religions of the world, glimmers of the nightmare of the Apocalypse are cast upon the globalized mission dream of Ecumenism, a worldwide mission without Christ, ready to accept and preach the Antichrist.

The one and only way out of the dead end of this ecumenistic ecclesiology and mission – which has done more to split the Orthodox Church than unite Her – is the path of Orthodox mission.

If Protestant mission led us into ecumenism, Orthodox mission will lead us out: tried and tested apostolic and patristic mission, true, uncompromising, ascetic, otherworldly, and sacrificial, which aims at heavenly, not temporal, ends. Mission in the spirit and tradition of Apostles Peter and Paul, Ss. Cyril and Methodios, St. Stephen of Perm, St. Kosmas Aitolos, St. Innocent of Alaska, and, in our own times, Blessed Father Cosmas of Grigoriou and Zaire and the ever-memorable Bishop Nectarios of Madagascar.

To such Orthodox witness there can be no objection on the part of anyone. Such an Orthodox witness can unite all Orthodox in the realization of an authentic catholic vision of mission, where we all, according to the words of the Apostle Peter, will *be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh a reason of the hope that is in you* (1 Peter 3:15).

With such a spiritual and authentically ecclesiastical Mission we will be able to call all – heterodox and all religious believers – into the unique Ark of salvation, the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, which is in truth the very Body of the Resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷³ The holy and renown Elder Paisios the Athonite puts it this way: “That which is required of every Orthodox [Christian] is *to pass on the good uneasiness to the heterodox*, in order that they may understand that they are in delusion, so as not to falsely be at peace with their thoughts and be deprived in this life of the rich blessings of Orthodoxy and in the next life the much greater and eternal blessings of God. See: Paisios Agiorite, Elder, *With Pain and Love for Contemporary Man* (Souroti, Thessaloniki, Greece: Holy Monastery, of St. John the Theologian, 1999), p. 349 [In Greek].